DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 438 741 FL 801 360

AUTHOR Seufert, Peggy
TITLE Refugees as English Language Learners: Issues and Concerns. ERIC Q & A.
INSTITUTION National Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education, Washington, DC.
SPONS AGENCY Department of Education, Washington, DC.
PUB DATE 1999-09-00
NOTE 6p.
CONTRACT RR93002010
AVAILABLE FROM NCLE, 4646 40th Street, NW, Washington, DC 20016-1859. For full text see: http://www.cal.org/ncle/DIGESTS.
PUB TYPE ERIC Publications (071)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Acculturation; Adult Education; Adult Learning; Career Counseling; *English (Second Language); Ethnic Groups; *Job Skills; Land Settlement; Program Design; *Refugees; Second Language Instruction; Second Language Learning

ABSTRACT

Culture orientation training is received by the approximately 78,000 to 90,000 refugees settled in the United States each year. In this text, commonly asked questions concerning refugees' ethnic origins and English language abilities are explored as well as program considerations for serving this population. Topics of discussion are: who are the refugees and where are they from; a comparison of overseas training to past training and the implications for U.S. service providers; factors considered in setting up instructional programs for refugees; recommended curricular approaches; how employment skills can be integrated with English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) training; and how ESL programs with limited funds offer support services, curriculum innovations, and technology access to refugees. (Contains 25 references.) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education) (KFT)

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ERIC Q & A

September 1999

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ERIC Q&A

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Refugees as English Language Learners: Issues and Concerns

by Peggy Seufert
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There are over 22.3 million refugees and internally displaced people in the world (*Populations of concern to UNHCR*, 1999). Of that number, 78,000 to 90,000 refugees are resettled in the United States each year. This Q&A addresses some of the most commonly asked questions concerning these refugees' ethnic origins and the English language and culture orientation training they receive overseas. It also discusses program considerations for serving refugees.

Who are the Refugees?

A refugee is "someone who has fled across a national border from his or her home country, or who is unable to return to it because of a well-founded fear that he or she will be persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or for being a member of a particular social group" (Wilkes, 1994, p. 7). From 1975 to 1985, over one million refugees arrived in the United States—with more than 75% coming from Southeast Asia. Since 1986, there has been a shift in the countries of origin of the refugee population, with more than half coming from Europe and the Former Soviet Union (FSU). As political, ethnic, and religious conflicts explode in the Balkans and in certain parts of Asia and Africa, the refugee population becomes even more diversified.

The table below shows the actual refugee arrivals in the United States from six regions of the world between fiscal years 1995 and 1998 with the projected arrivals for fiscal years 1999 and 2000.

In addition to these numbers, approximately 14,000 Albanian Kosovars arrived in the United States in the late spring and summer of 1999. Some 4,200 passed through Fort Dix, New Jersey, where the goal was to process them for resettlement as quickly as possible, focusing on medical and immigration screening. Intensive English as a second language (ESL) and Cultural Orientation (CO) classes were offered, and there were many informal exchanges among the thousands of refugees, staff, and volunteers. It is not known how many Albanian Kosovars will return to Kosovo or how many more might come to join their families in the United States (Seufert, 1999).

Also noteworthy for 1999 and 2000 are the significant increases in the admissions of refugees from Africa. This is a shift in U.S. resettlement policy towards the peoples who have been displaced in Africa for many years.

As the countries of origin of refugees diversify, service providers note a wider range of differences in refugee backgrounds, asylum or flight experiences, and knowledge of U.S. culture. For example, some of the Bosnian refugees lived in Germany for five to seven years where many had relatively comfortable housing and benefited from a liberal social welfare system. Many of the adults worked and children attended school, and they had some contact with U.S. culture through the popular media. These Bosnians often arrive in the United States with unreal expectations related to housing, social welfare, education, and employment. Many Somalis, Sudanese, Liberians, Ethiopians, and Sierra Leoneans have come out of extremely inhospitable (and often dangerous) camp environments or cities where they could neither work nor study and where their basic food and health needs were barely met. Many of these refugees have had little contact with U.S. culture. Yet they may also arrive with unreal expectations about life in the United States and about the amount of help that will be available to them.

Refugee Arrivals in the United States

	FY 95	FY 96	FY 97	FY 98	FY 99	FY 2000
Africa	4,779	7,512	6,069	6,662	12,000	18,000
East Asia	36,926	19,235	8,590	10,848	9,000	8,000
Near East/ South Asia	4,464	3,788	3,990	3,197	4,000	8,000
Eastern Europe	9,987	12,801	21,378	30,911	48,000	47,000
Russia/ FSU	35,716	29,536	27,072	23,349		
Latin America	7,618	3,541	2,986	1,587	3,000	3,000
Reserve unallocated	2,000	2,000	5,000	3,000	2,000	6,000
TOTAL	99,490	75,693	70,085	76,554	78,000	90,000

From Regional refugee ceilings and admissions to the United States. (1998). *Refugee Reports, 19*(12), p. 9. Adapted with permission.

How is the current overseas training different from the past and what are the implications for U.S. service providers?

From 1980 to 1995, almost all refugees from Southeast Asia passed through one of the overseas processing centers in the Philippines, Thailand, or Indonesia where they received four to six months of ESL and work orientation classes as well as U.S. cultural orientation instruction in their native language. Primary and secondary schools were also set up in the refugee camps in response to the concerns of K-12 schools in the United States

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(Pfleger & Ranard, 1995). By the time these earlier refugees arrived in the United States, most, if not all, had received purposeful exposure to English and to the U.S. workplace and culture.

This is no longer the case, however. Since the mid 1990s, ESL and workplace training have not been separate components of the refugee-funded overseas programs that operate in more than 20 countries worldwide (e.g., Cuba, Austria, Croatia, Germany, Greece, Turkey, Russia, Kenya, Egypt, Senegal, Ghana). Training has been significantly reduced to focus on processing the refugees for resettlement as quickly as possible. As refugees prepare for departure with immigration, security, and medical screening checks, each family receives a copy of *Welcome to the United States: A Guidebook for Refugees* (Center for Applied Linguistics, 1997b), which provides basic information in nine different languages about life in the United States. In addition, refugees aged 12 and above are encouraged to attend a condensed CO training that might last one-half day, one to three days, or between five and ten days.

These overseas CO classes are offered in the refugees' native languages, and in some countries there are full-time trainers who use a variety of approaches in an attempt to not only impart knowledge, but also to develop critical thinking and continued learning skills. Staff from the overseas programs sponsored by International Organization for Migration (IOM), the International Catholic Migration Committee (ICMC), and the U.S. Cultural Orientation Project have developed intensive CO curricula with supporting teaching suggestions and materials (U.S. Cultural Orientation Project/USCC, 1999). The *Welcome Refugee Guide to Resettlement: Refugee Orientation Video* (Center for Applied Linguistics, 1997a) and *Trainers' Notebook* (Center for Applied Linguistics, 1999) are also used in cultural and language training.

Trainers travel to places on a regular basis to offer classes. The teaching conditions vary greatly—from modern classrooms to mere shaded spaces under the trees. The training groups vary also. Within a group, there may be university-educated professionals sitting alongside non-literate people. However, even given these efforts to reach all groups in all locations, many refugees do not receive any training prior to departure.

With such diversity both in the refugee population and in the training they receive prior to coming to the United States, domestic service providers and ESL practitioners have to assess the needs of each individual at program entry and throughout the resettlement process.

What personal factors need to be considered in setting up instructional programs for refugees?

There are a number of personal factors that have an impact on refugees' progress in learning English. Service providers and funding sources need to consider the following in planning instructional programs for adults.

Limited time to study. Since the 1996 welfare reform regulations took effect (Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, PL #104-193), many more refugees have entered the workforce soon after their arrival in the United States—often within the first 30 to 90 days. Although everyone recognizes the need to study English, many refugees find it extremely difficult to find the time and energy to attend classes since they may be working more than one job and commuting long distances while simultaneously maintaining a family and adjusting to life in the United States.

Howard McClusky's "power-load-margin" formula (Main, 1979, p. 19-33) can be applied to refugees today. "Power" is the total amount of energy a refugee has, "load" is the energy used for basic daily survival, and "margin" is what is left and can be applied to other activities such as learning. This formula may explain why many adult refugees and immigrants learn English at different paces and why they may need more time to learn English at a level to support their goals for self-sufficiency. This may mean enough language to be eligible for job promotions and higher education.

Previous experience with education. Refugees may arrive with postgraduate degrees, or they may be unable to read and write in their own languages. Regardless of the amount of previous education, however, like many adult immigrant learners, refugees were often educated in systems that stressed listening, observing, and reading; imitating and responding to teachers' questions; and taking tests that required only the recall of factual information (Cheng, 1998). Initially, some refugees may be reluctant to express their opinions and ideas in classroom activities. Others might misinterpret the more relaxed nature of an American classroom and may sometimes act inappropriately. Effective ESL practitioners adapt instruction not only for literacy levels and learning styles, but also for individual learning goals such as basic English for survival, English for housekeepers, or more advanced English to pass the admissions examination for a professional preparation course.

Psychological needs. For refugees coming from cultures that place a high value on family, the shifts in family dynamics can be quite stressful. Roles change when women find work outside the home and when children adapt more quickly than their parents and find themselves acting as translators and cultural brokers for their elders (Ullman, 1997; Weinstein, 1998). The stress and trauma that refugees experience may be manifested in symptoms such as difficulty concentrating, memory loss, fatigue and drowsiness, somatic complaints, and frequent absences that can have a direct effect on learning (Adkins, Birman, & Sample, 1999). Although ESL practitioners cannot be expected to be mental health experts, they can create the conditions to enhance the mental well being of their students. When planning lessons, teachers can ask themselves how a particular activity might help learners not only develop language skills to survive, but also the confidence to thrive in the United States. Adkins, Birman, and Sample recommend including lessons on planning goals and objectives, telling stories, and learning how to express emotions. Teachers can also collaborate with refugee and social service programs in helping the refugees learn how to access community resources. The ESL classroom can become a place where learners share their concerns and strategies for coping with work, personal, and family life.

What other factors should be considered in designing programs for refugees?

Educators say that adult learners are more likely to remain in programs that help them set realistic goals, use varied instructional approaches, and are linked to support services such as child care, transportation, and health centers (Brod, 1995). The 1994 National Evaluation of Adult Education Programs (NEAEP), conducted by Development Associates, identified three program factors that relate to high levels of learner retention in adult ESL programs (Fitzgerald, 1995). Learners continue in programs when they

1. have access to support services provided by programs (such as counseling, transportation, and child care);
2. attend day classes rather than studying at night; and
3. participate in computer-assisted learning labs or in instruction that includes independent study.

What are some recommended curricular approaches?

Adult educators often adapt and mix numerous approaches within a single program to meet the needs and learning styles of a class (Florez, 1998; Peyton & Crandall, 1995). The following approaches are widely accepted:

- Freirean and participatory approaches that start with real issues in the learners' lives and develop the curriculum and language skills to address those issues, such as advocating for children, speaking up on the job, or dealing with legal problems.

- Competency-based approaches that stress the importance of learning the language for real-life tasks (also known as life skills or survival skills), such as completing applications, reading schedules, and asking for information.
- Integrated, theme-based approaches that link language learning to topics of interest to the learners, such as cultural comparisons, health practices, or citizenship.
- Language experience approaches that use shared events and experiences from learners' lives as starting points for creating stories. A story is elicited from the participants, and it then becomes the text for language development and conversation.
- Task-based and project-based approaches that require learners to use English as a team to solve a problem or complete a project. For example, teams can research strategies for immigrant parents to work more effectively with schools, compile stories for a newsletter or book, or prepare visual presentations or events.

While it is true that many refugee learners may have had little exposure to these approaches, ESL service providers should not restrict instruction to grammar-based activities. Teachers need to include exercises that allow refugees to express their feelings as they "re-create" themselves in their new country (Ullman, 1997, p. 2). There are specific activities inherent in the above approaches that may facilitate this re-creation. Learners can write in dialogue journals, prepare portfolios of their own work, participate in both large and small group discussions, and improvise dialogues. These activities provide learners with opportunities to express themselves while improving their language skills.

How can employment skills be integrated with ESL?

Because of the focus on employment through the Workforce Investment Act (1998, PL 105-220), many refugee-funded programs must also assist adults in obtaining the knowledge and skills necessary for employment and self-sufficiency. The Secretary's Commission on Necessary Skills (SCANS) (U.S. Department of Labor, 1991) outlined competencies and foundation skills needed for job performance across professions and beyond entry-level jobs. Effective workers (both native and non-native speakers of English) must be able to do the following:

- manage resources (time, money, materials, space, and staff);
- manage information (acquiring and evaluating data, organizing and maintaining files, and interpreting and communicating information);
- interact socially (working on teams, teaching others, serving, leading, negotiating, and working in multicultural environments);
- understand systems (both organizational and technological, monitoring and correcting performance); and
- use technology (selecting and applying technology to specific tasks).

These competencies require a foundation in (a) basic skills, (b) thinking skills, and (c) personal qualities such as responsibility, self-esteem, self-management, and integrity.

More recently, Equipped for the Future (EFF), an initiative by the National Institute for Literacy, has developed an approach to lifelong learning that incorporates content standards on what adults know and can do. EFF identifies three roles—family members, workers, and members of a community—and lists the common activities used to carry out each of these EFF roles (Stein, 1997). Similar to the SCANS paradigm, EFF lists the following skills needed to carry out activities:

- communication skills (read with understanding, convey ideas in writing, speak so others can understand, listen actively, and observe critically);
- decision-making skills (use mathematics in problem solving and communication, solve programs and make decisions, plan);
- interpersonal skills (cooperate with others, advocate and influence, resolve conflict and negotiate, and guide others); and
- lifelong learning skills (take responsibility for learning, reflect and evaluate, learn through research, use information and communications technology).

Summarizing data from the 1994 NEAEP study, Fitzgerald (1995) reported some interesting findings regarding the relationship between English proficiency and employability. Although the English skill levels for most ESL learners in the study were only sufficient for entry-level jobs at the beginning of the program, the six-month follow up indicated that 35% of the students who had received ESL instruction had benefited in terms of better jobs. Scores on tests and learner self-reporting six months after program exit also showed that ESL instruction had helped the majority (60%) improve their basic English skills. For more information on integrating employment skills with ESL instruction, see Grognet (1997) and Marshall (1999).

How can ESL programs, working with limited funds, offer the kinds of support services, curriculum innovations, and technology access that refugees need?

One of the most consistent messages from government funding sources is a call for partnerships to offer more integrated services. Collaborations and consortia can create "comprehensive networks of service delivery to address all the barriers that welfare recipients [and refugees] face" and can "ultimately make the difference between short-term, insecure job placements, and long-term self-sufficiency" (Marshall, 1998, p. 5). Refugees and immigrants can be more effectively served when business, labor, education, and social services agree that the following are mutually beneficial:

- providing instruction that enables learners to master the language for self-sufficiency (finding, keeping, and advancing in jobs) as well as the language for family and community life;
- offering on-site and off-site classes with flexible schedules;
- providing access to auxiliary support services (child care, health care, transportation);
- involving families in learning together;
- promoting lifelong learning; and
- budgeting sufficient resources for training programs, including technology use.

Programs across the country need to become creative in identifying and sharing resources. Pima County in Tucson, Arizona, has continued to offer workplace training without federal funding by combining contracts with companies and adult education. In this program, the employer pays for the classes, and Pima County Adult Education pays for the curriculum development and teacher training (Burt, 1997). Under the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) regulations, day care can be treated as a priority employment-related service, so ORR and other public funds are being used to assist working refugees with child care expenses. In addition, each state has a Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. CHIP can provide protection to children who might otherwise be without medical coverage (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 1999).

Collaboration among organizations is not an easy task; it takes time, persistence, and trust. Education, social services, business, and labor must develop shared goals. It is then than that the refugees' best interests are served. ♦

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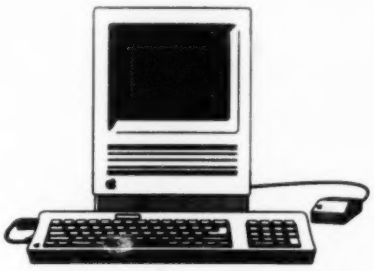

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